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# NEPAL: displaced and ignored

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*More than 100,000 people have been internally displaced in Nepal in the last two years; but these internally displaced people (IDPs) remain largely unrecognised, receiving little assistance to cope with their displacement. Young people in particular have been uprooted from the countryside either by Maoist rebels, government forces or the effects of war. Moving to cities, with families in rural areas or migrating to India, conditions for IDPs vary greatly. Displaced children in cities appear to be some of the worst affected. The government has ignored many displaced people, providing only limited and restricted help. International agencies have lately planned to assist IDP-affected areas.*

## Many uprooted in conflict

Displaced people in Nepal have fled actions by 'Maoist' rebels and government forces, as well as the effects of war. Particularly after November 2001, when security deteriorated markedly in rural areas, many people fled to urbanized district headquarters, large cities like Kathmandu and Nepalgunj, and across the border to India. By late 2002, fighting between government forces and the Maoists affected 73 of Nepal's 75 districts, some six years after the rebels launched a "people's war" in 1996.

Firstly, rural families have been displaced by the Maoist rebels. Most people displaced in the conflict are from relatively well-off strata of the population: landlords, party workers, security personnel, teachers and Village Development Committee (VDC) chairmen, according to a 2002 USAID-commissioned study into conflict-induced displacement. These groups have mainly fled the Maoist rebels, who specifically targeted them. In this way, some 3,000 teachers have been displaced from district schools and some 700 private schools targeted by the Maoists have closed down since 1996, according to the Department of Education. Young people have also fled forced recruitment by the Maoist forces.

Secondly, civilians have fled the actions of Nepalese government security forces in their operations against the Maoists. Although underreported, many villagers have been displaced by food blockades, torture and killings by security forces. Civilians have been killed on suspicion of providing food, shelter or financial assistance to the Maoists, and often tortured by the army and police, according to Amnesty International (AI 19 December 2002, pp.7-8). Displacement caused by security forces has been partly hidden by a government-imposed state of emergency from November 2001 to August 2002. This ruling suspended fundamental constitutional rights, including freedom of expression and the right to information, undermining independent reporting on displacement caused by the security forces.

Thirdly, people have fled rural areas due to the fighting and its effects. Civilians have been fleeing their villages for fear of being caught in the crossfire in districts such as Rolpa or Lamjung or the indirect consequences of fighting, including lack of employment or education opportunities for young people. The conflict has led to the breakdown of education, closure of businesses, weakening of local economies and interruption of public services. More young men have reportedly moved to India due to the conflict (Martinez, Esperanza, July 2002, pp. 12-14). 'Internal migration' of students from one district to another has strained schools in Dang and Bardiya, raising teacher-student ratios to 1:70 when the national average is 1:40 (Kathmandu Post, 13 Nov 2002).

Although many people have fled rural areas, some of the most affected people could be the ones who stayed behind. Many families, the elderly, women, children and poor villagers have been less able to flee, staying behind to face worsening poverty, food shortages, and harassment by the Maoists and security forces.

## Displaced in cities

Most of Nepal's displaced people have moved to cities, stay with family members in rural areas, or have migrated to India. People fleeing the conflict and insecurity have tended to move among urban and economic migrants, amid continued urbanization and traditional migration patterns from rural areas to urban centres, or emigration to India.

Many IDPs are now thought to be living in urban centres and district headquarters throughout Nepal, including Kathmandu, Biratnagar, Nepalgunj, Bhairahawa and Pokhara. The population of 12 municipalities grew by 5.2% over the last two years, compared to 3.6% between 1991 and 2001, according to an UNDP-RUPP<sup>1</sup> survey (GTZ, INF, SNV, UNDP/RUPP, NHRC & the Global IDP Project, March 2003, p.5). This represents an increase of 80,000 rural-urban migrants in the last two years, coinciding with the intensified conflict.

Other displaced people appear to be living in rural areas with families or friends. Little information is available on those who have sought safety in other villages or dispersed in rural areas. Participants in a recent workshop on internal displacement in Nepal,<sup>2</sup> however, noted that some people have preferred to stay with relatives in nearby villages than to migrate to urban areas where they didn't know anybody.

### IDP figures for Nepal\*

Total number of IDPs: 100-150,000  
Total number of government-registered IDPs: 7,343  
Families of displaced former bonded labourers or 'Kamaiyas': 7,000

Number of people killed since 1996: 7,000  
Total population of Nepal: 22,000,000  
Percentage displaced: 0.6%

\*all figures are estimates based on available information

Displaced people have also moved to India, becoming internally displaced on their way to the border or – potentially at least – on their return. Some 120,000 displaced Nepalese crossed into India during January 2003 alone – fleeing both forced recruitment by the Maoists and RNA attacks, Indian Embassy officials have said (ICG 10 April 2003, p. 2). And at the end of 2002, some 8,000 people crossed the border every week, according to media reports and NGOs working in Nepalgunj. This major influx was prompted by

<sup>1</sup> Data gathered by an UNDP-RUPP (Rural-Urban Partnership Programme) survey conducted in 12 municipalities in 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The Global IDP Project of the Norwegian Refugee Council and the National Human Rights Commission held a two-day workshop on the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement on 5-6 March 2003 in Dhulikel, Nepal

difficult living conditions and fear of being caught in the crossfire in rural areas (The Nepali Times 19 December 2002). The many young people fleeing for safety or seeking new livelihoods have added to a long-standing migration flow. The open nature of the border with India and lack of monitoring have made it difficult to accurately estimate how many of these fled as a consequence of the conflict.

## **Varied conditions**

While Nepalese IDPs live in very varied conditions, some displaced children appear to be facing particularly difficult and unsafe conditions. Many young children have moved to urban or semi-urban areas, unhygienic conditions and hostile environments, where their families can ill-afford to send them to school. Some live on the street, denied an education and exposed to a variety of threats. The total number of displaced children in Nepal is estimated at 4,000, although the real figure could be far higher (CWIN 2003). Children who fled actions of the security forces appear to be denied any help and may be too afraid to seek it (The Nepali Times 23 January 2003). Many displaced children have witnessed violence and destruction, and are likely traumatised. Without a comprehensive analysis of IDP children and their situation, their needs are overlooked in current assessment efforts, according to Save the Children (SC-UK March 2003, pp. 11-12).

Many of the young people who fled to urban areas have faced difficult conditions, although most appear to be living in relative physical security. The sudden population surge to the cities has strained basic infrastructure: roads, water supplies, sanitation and waste management, as well as health and education. Some IDPs live with family members, but others have few resources and no one to help them. The latter group are forced to rent small rooms with other displaced people; some 73% of new arrivals lived in rented accommodation, according to an UNDP-RUPP survey (GTZ, INF, SNV, UNDP/RUPP, NHRC & the Global IDP Project, March 2003, p.12). When they find employment, these young displaced people are generally poorly paid, partly because their own arrival has driven down wages in jobs that require low or minimal capital investment, are physically demanding, insecure and that generate low returns. Along with poor economic migrants, displaced people work in factories, sell forest products or do small trading.

Displaced people living with their relatives in rural areas may also face particular hardship, overstressing their relatives' resources where malnutrition rates are already at 20%. People in 45 out of 75 districts in Nepal already suffer from chronic food deficits, with about half of children under five years of age suffering from moderate to severe malnutrition (WFP 2003). Nonetheless, an ICRC food security assessment in districts of western Nepal, most affected by the conflict, found no acute food shortages in the area (ICRC 13 January 2003). Meanwhile, the depopulation of parts of western Nepal and a lack of institutions in the countryside have become growing worries (ICG 10 April 2003, p. 2).

Many of the wealthier IDPs, however, have been able to find shelter in cities and can expect to return to their homes when conditions improve. Most of them were specifically targeted by Maoists for their association, real or perceived, with the regime. A large majority of this IDP group sought refuge in district headquarters and main cities; they are not thought to experience major problems in their daily survival. Some have reportedly been able to buy land or build new houses.

## **Government ignores many**

Government assistance to war victims, including displaced people, has been very limited in Nepal. Although the government established several compensation and resettlement funds for victims of the conflict, like the Victims of Conflict Fund under which IDP families were entitled to an equivalent of US\$1.3 per day, most of the money was spent by July 2002. All those displaced after July 2002 were therefore excluded from assistance and official recognition. Even sources at the Ministry of Home Affairs recognised the government has not fully analysed the extent of the internal displacement problem, noting however that spending on conflict and additional security measures had reduced funds available for programmes that target displaced people.

Official assistance has only been provided to people displaced by the Maoists, and not to those displaced by the government security forces. Government guidelines for providing assistance to conflict victims only applies to those affected by the actions of the Maoists. Reports prepared by the Chief District Officers at district level do not include victims of the security forces, denying these victims access to government support (Martinez, Esperanza, July 2002, p.18-19).

Government assistance for displaced people, moreover, was reportedly only accessible to those with political connections. District Development Committee chairmen and NGO field workers said that these government funds were accessible to well-connected politicians, bureaucrats and their clients more than to 'ordinary citizens' (Martinez, Esperanza, July 2002, p.18-19).

Official data collection on displaced people has tended to mask the displacement problem. Authorities have not encouraged displaced people to come forward with their problems, and people remained reluctant to register as displaced for fear of retaliation or being suspected as rebel sympathizers. Moreover, government data has excluded people directly or indirectly affected by the actions of security forces and the politicised compensation system (Martinez, Esperanza, July 2002, pp. 8-9).

Furthermore, the government has not facilitated access for humanitarian organizations. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been denied access to people arrested and wounded in the conflict. It has also denied long-term visas to some 15 ICRC delegates. A Home Ministry official suggested these actions might be designed to prevent ICRC from establishing a foothold in the country at a time when reports of human rights violations by security forces were on the upswing (APHRC 14 January 2002).

National and international NGOs and UN agencies participating in a recent workshop agreed that the government has done little to help IDPs, but suggested this was partly due to travel restrictions and lack of knowledge of conditions in areas of origin. The agencies said that displaced people and local communities were left to solve problems resulting from displacement without external help. (GTZ, INF, SNV, UNDP/RUPP, NHRC & the Global IDP Project, March 2003, p. 15)

A recent ceasefire, however, may allow IDPs to return if and when safe conditions on the ground are established. The January 2003 ceasefire signed by the government and Maoists raised cautious hopes that 7 years of civil fighting, destruction, bloodshed and displacement may come to an end. Although fighting has subsided, the situation on the ground has reportedly changed little with ongoing extortion by the Maoists, recruitment and training, and conditions not yet conducive for large-scale return. Most IDPs appear to have adopted a wait-and-see attitude (The Kathmandu Post 3 February 2003).

## **International aid untargeted**

Many UN agencies and international NGOs have been in Nepal for many years providing development-oriented assistance, but almost none provide humanitarian relief or target their assistance to IDPs. With the state of emergency in November 2001, aid programmes have been hampered or stopped by poor security conditions in rural areas. Some agencies have recently begun to consider displacement more specifically, but cooperation with local NGOs remains limited.

Agencies have planned to assist IDP-affected areas mainly through development programmes. Although IDP-specific interventions may be needed during re-settlement or to meet basic needs, most IDPs are difficult or impossible to identify and trying to help them on the basis of their displacement may create divisions between marginalised people in host communities and marginalised IDPs. (GTZ, INF, SNV, UNDP/RUPP, NHRC & the Global IDP Project, March 2003, p. 15)

Agencies participating in the workshop were inclined to assist IDP-affected areas rather than targeting displaced people themselves, through interventions that enhance the ability of IDP-affected areas to 'absorb' displaced people. The approach would involve working to reduce vulnerabilities and to increase the capacities of host communities, new arrivals and influx areas in a sustainable way." (GTZ, INF, SNV, UNDP/RUPP, NHRC & the Global IDP Project, March 2003, p. 22)

Aid agencies are also starting to address the information void that has complicated assistance to displaced people. According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the main international and national aid agencies in Nepal have established an Information System for Contingency Planning for Nepal (ISCP), described as a common information system to monitor the impact of the conflict, needs of the population, and assistance

programmes. The ISCP will aim at presenting monthly updated pictures of the situation mainly of food security, health and population displacement. (UNDP March 2003)

## **Suggestions**

### **To Nepal's Ministry of Home Affairs:**

- Urgently assess the specific needs of vulnerable groups of internally displaced people, including all people displaced by government security forces, children denied an education, young people struggling to survive in cities, as well as rural host families, addressing their essential needs through all relevant national programmes in cooperation with relevant international aid agencies.
- Review its official definition of IDPs and current assistance guidelines to include people displaced by actions of government security forces, encouraging people to seek government assistance and ensuring that requests for assistance do not lead to arbitrary persecution or punishment.
- Reduce the effects of conflict that have caused people to flee from rural areas, working with the Maoists to ensure safety for civilians, rebuild infrastructure and remove all conditions that might lead to displacement or discourage return movements. All these actions should be carried out by both sides according to the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

### **To International Aid Agencies in Nepal:**

- Urgently assess the specific needs of vulnerable groups of internally displaced people, including all people displaced by government security forces, children denied an education, young people struggling to survive in cities, as well as rural host families, addressing their essential needs through all relevant humanitarian and development programmes, in cooperation with relevant government authorities.
- Systematically monitor the needs of IDPs and any violations of their rights according to the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, passing information to the UNDP's Information System for Contingency Planning for Nepal

## Notes

The Global IDP Project, based in Geneva, monitors internal displacement worldwide, as requested by the United Nations in 1998. It is part of the Norwegian Refugee Council, an organization that has assisted refugees worldwide since 1953. For more information about IDPs from conflict in 50 countries, visit our website [www.idpproject.org](http://www.idpproject.org).

This report is based on latest information in the Global IDP Database for Nepal:

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